

England (United Kingdom)

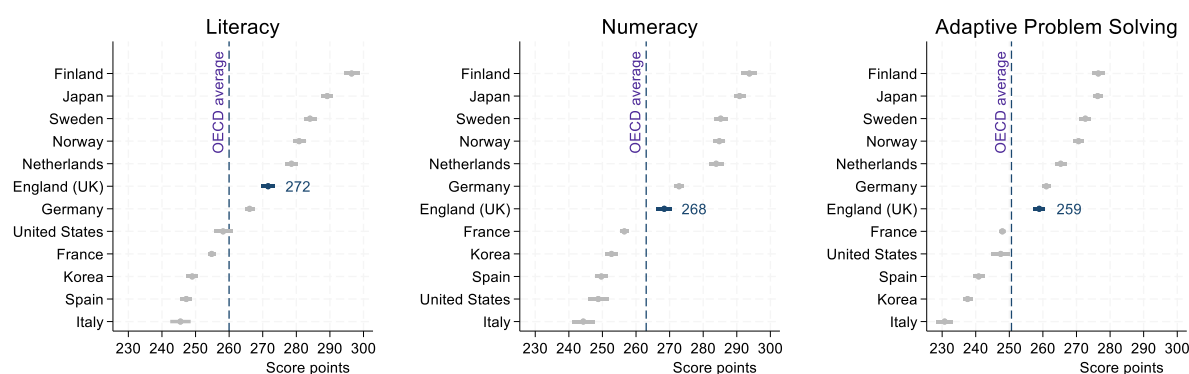
The Survey of Adult Skills offers unique insights on adults' proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving. These skills are crucial for both personal and societal success, and form the foundation for continuous learning and innovation. Skilled adults are better equipped to handle the complexities of modern life. By effectively navigating today's information-rich environment, they contribute to more informed decisions and policies.

In 2022-23, the survey assessed adults aged 16-65 in 31 countries and economies. England (United Kingdom) participated in the Survey of Adult Skills for the second time in 2022-23 (its first participation was in 2011-12). By comparing results over time and with those of other participating countries and economies, England (United Kingdom) can track the skill levels of its adult population, pinpoint barriers to skill development and use, and craft effective policies to address these challenges.

How well did adults in England (United Kingdom) do in the assessment?

Figure 1. Mean performance in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving

England (United Kingdom), OECD average and selected comparison countries/economies



Notes: Comparison countries include the highest-performing countries, and the participating countries and economies with the largest population of adults aged 16-65. Horizontal lines that extend beyond the markers represent a measure of uncertainty associated with mean estimates (the 95% confidence interval).

Source: [Table A.2.1](#).

In England (United Kingdom), adults aged 16-65 scored, on average, 272 points in literacy (above the OECD average), 268 points in numeracy (above the OECD average), and 259 points in adaptive problem solving (above the OECD average) (Figure 1).

In literacy, 18% of adults (OECD average: 26%) scored at Level 1 or below, meaning they have low literacy proficiency. At Level 1, they can understand short texts and organised lists when information is clearly indicated, find specific information and identify relevant links. Those below Level 1 can at most understand

short, simple sentences. At the other end of the spectrum, 14% of adults (OECD average: 12%) scored at Levels 4 or 5 in literacy and are high performers. These adults can comprehend and evaluate long, dense texts across several pages, grasp complex or hidden meanings, and use prior knowledge to understand texts and complete tasks (see Table 2.4 in Chapter 2 for a description of what adults can do at each proficiency level in literacy, and Figure 2 for the proportion of adults at each level).

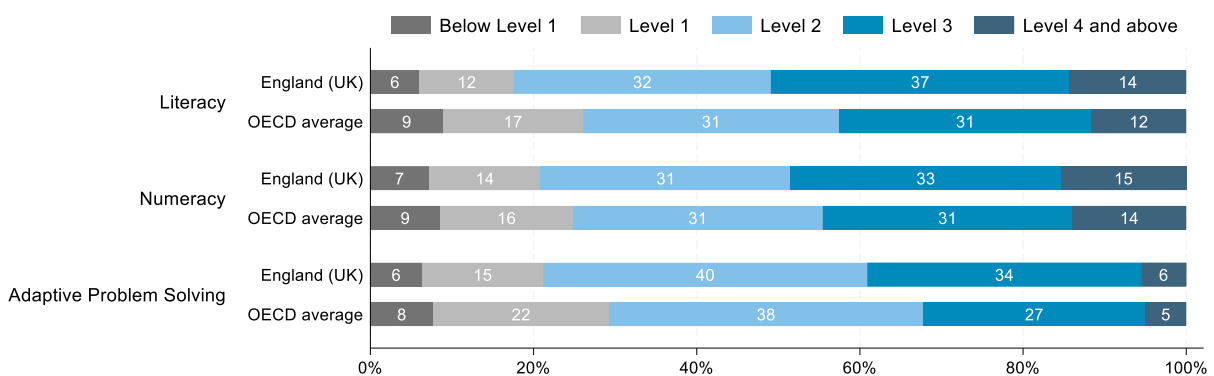
In numeracy, 21% of adults (OECD average: 25%) scored at or below Level 1 proficiency. At Level 1, they can do basic maths with whole numbers or money, understand decimals, and find single pieces of information in tables or charts, but may struggle with tasks needing multiple steps (e.g. solving a proportion). Those below Level 1 can add and subtract small numbers. Adults at Levels 4 or 5 are top performers (15% in England (United Kingdom), 14% on average across OECD countries and economies). They can calculate and understand rates and ratios, interpret complex graphs, and critically evaluate statistical claims. (see Table 2.5 in Chapter 2 for a description of what adults can do at each proficiency level in numeracy, and Figure 2 for the proportion of adults at each level).

In adaptive problem solving, 21% of adults (OECD average: 29%) scored at or below Level 1 proficiency. Adults at Level 1 can solve simple problems with few variables and little irrelevant information, which do not change as they make progress towards the solution. They struggle with multi-step problems, or those needing monitoring of multiple variables. Adults below Level 1 at most understand very simple problems, typically solved in one step. Some 6% of adults (OECD average: 5%) scored at Level 4. They have a deeper understanding of problems, and can adapt to unexpected changes, even if they require a major re-evaluation of the problem (see Table 2.6 in Chapter 2 for a description of what adults can do at each proficiency level in adaptive problem solving, and Figure 2 for the proportion of adults at each level).

When considering all three domains jointly, 14% of adults in England (United Kingdom) (OECD average: 18%) scored at the two lowest levels of these proficiency scales ([Table A.2.3](#)).

Figure 2. Proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem solving among adults

England (United Kingdom) and OECD average



Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

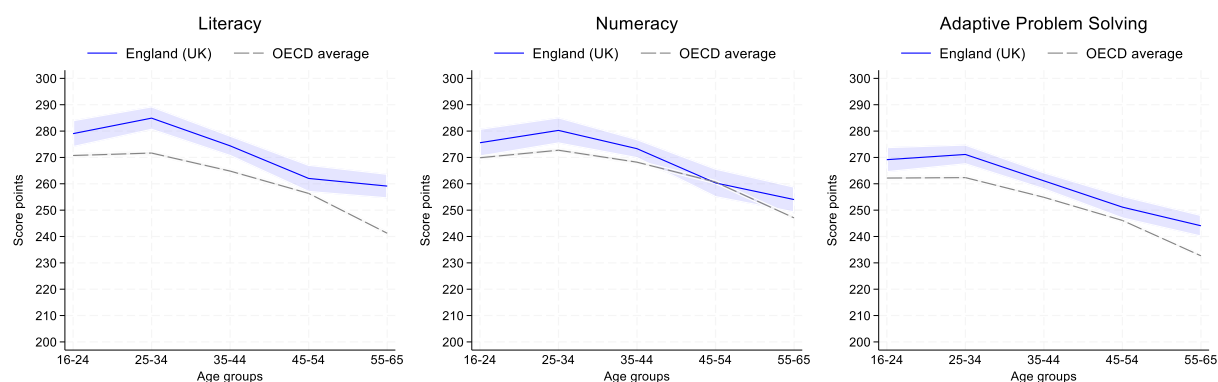
Source: [Table A.2.2](#).

Older adults (aged 55 to 65) in England (United Kingdom) displayed lower proficiency than 25-34 year-olds in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving (Figure 3). In literacy, adults aged 55-65 scored 26 points lower than 25-34 year-olds (OECD average: 30 points lower). Skill gaps between older and younger adults could reflect ageing effects (see below), but also differences in the quality and quantity of education and training across generations.

For young adults still enrolled in initial education or who completed it only recently, the results of the Survey of Adult Skills complement those from school-based assessments and provide useful information about the quality of education systems. In England (United Kingdom), young adults aged 16 to 24 scored, on average, 279 points in literacy (above the OECD average), 276 points in numeracy (above the OECD average), and 269 points in adaptive problem solving (above the OECD average) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Average proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem solving, by age

England (United Kingdom) and OECD average



Note: The shaded area represents a measure of uncertainty associated with estimates (the 95% confidence interval).

Source: [Table A.2.4](#).

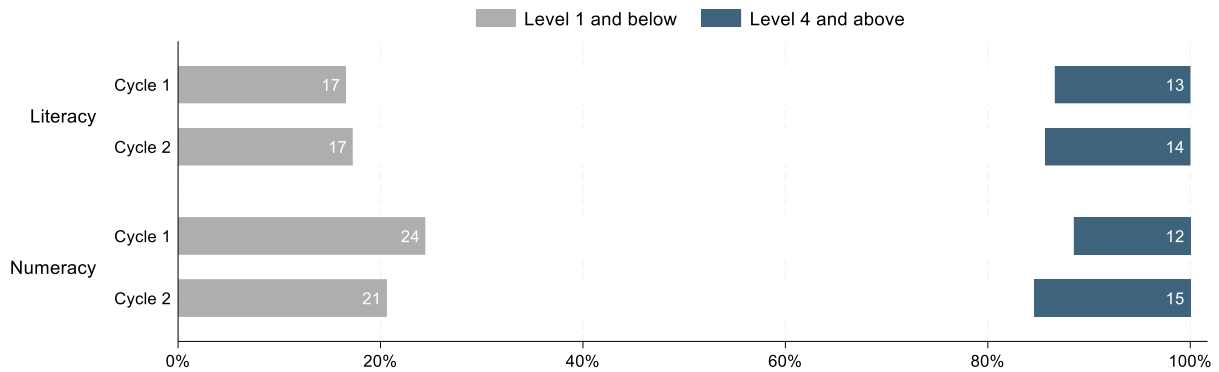
How did adults' skills evolve over the past decade?

In England (United Kingdom), average results in 2022-23 remained similar compared to 2011-12 in literacy and went up in numeracy ([Table A.3.1](#)). The average trend reflects similar trends at all levels of the performance distribution: in literacy, performance remained broadly stable; in numeracy, in contrast, similar improvements were observed at both the lower and higher parts of the distribution ([Table A.3.3](#)). The proportion of high-performing adults increased significantly in numeracy compared to 2011-12 (Figure 4).

Changes were not uniform, however, across age groups. Improvements in numeracy proficiency were driven in particular by younger adults (below 35); and, for adults aged 16-24, even literacy scores went up in England (United Kingdom) ([Table A.3.7](#)).

Figure 4. Share of adults scoring at low and high proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy

England (United Kingdom), 2011-12 and 2022-23



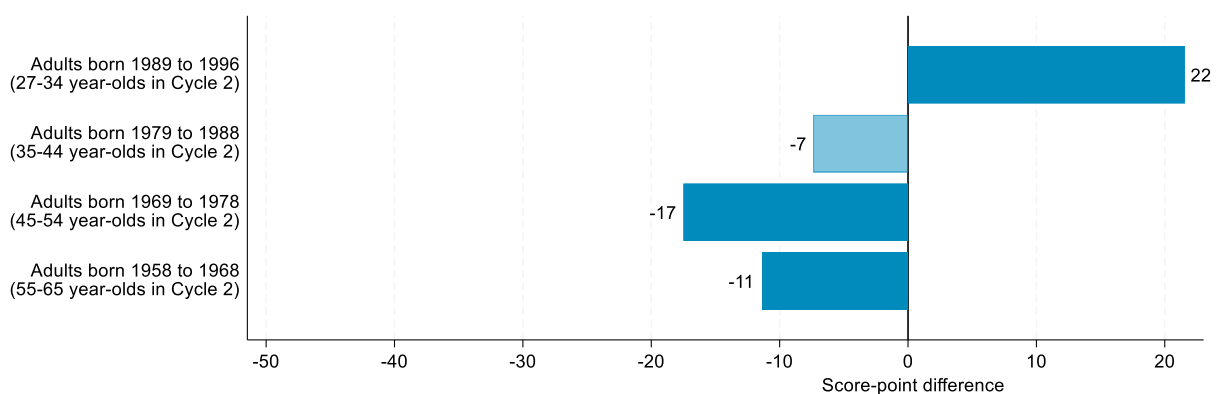
Note: Does not include adults who in Cycle 2 were only administered the doorstep interview due to a language barrier, to maximise the comparability across cycles.

Source: [Table A.3.2](#).

Comparing how adults born in the same years performed across different cycles, and, therefore, at different ages, provides insights into how skills change, on average, as people age. In most countries, these comparisons reveal substantial age-related skill losses after the age of 35 (but more rarely among younger adults). Age-related skill losses are also observed in England (United Kingdom). Young adults born between 1989 and 1996 scored 22 points higher in literacy in 2022-23 (when they were 27-34 years old) than in 2011-12 (when they were 16-23 years old), a significant change. Meanwhile, older generations, aged 44 to 54 in 2011-12, scored 11 points lower in literacy in 2022-23 (when they were 55-65 years old), a significant decline (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Effect of ageing on literacy proficiency in England (United Kingdom)

Change in literacy proficiency within birth cohorts (2011-12 to 2022-23)



Note: Does not include adults who in Cycle 2 were only administered the doorstep interview due to a language barrier, to maximise the comparability across cycles; does not include foreign-born adults who had lived in the country less than 10 years. Any non-significant differences are shown in a lighter tone.

Source: [Table A.3.10 \(L\)](#).

Skill differences related to educational attainment, gender and immigrant background

In all countries and economies, higher levels of educational attainment are associated with greater proficiency in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving. In England (United Kingdom), among adults aged 25-65, those with tertiary education scored 30 points higher in literacy than those with upper secondary education (OECD average: 33 points), and those with upper secondary education scored 43 points higher than those with less than upper secondary education (OECD average: 43 points) ([Table A.2.5 \(L\)](#)).

However, this pattern of higher proficiency for tertiary-educated adults does not always hold across borders. In literacy, adults with upper secondary attainment in England (United Kingdom), for example, scored higher than tertiary-educated adults in Chile ([Table A.2.5](#)).

On average, across participating OECD countries and economies, women displayed higher average proficiency than men in literacy (by 3 points), while men scored higher in numeracy (by 10 points) and adaptive problem solving (by 2 points). In England (United Kingdom), no significant difference was observed in literacy; a significant 16-point difference in favour of men was observed in numeracy; and a significant 5-point difference in favour of men was observed in adaptive problem solving ([Table A.2.7](#)).

Native-born adults of native-born parents displayed higher proficiency in literacy than foreign-born adults of foreign-born parents ([Table A.2.10 \(L\)](#)). The difference in literacy scores between the two groups corresponds to 34 points in literacy ([Table A.2.10 \(L\)](#)). In England (United Kingdom), native-born adults of native-born parents make up 66% of the population that participated in the Survey of Adult Skills, while the second group (foreign-born adults of foreign-born parents) accounts for 20% of the population. ([Table B.3.10](#)).

Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the proportion of foreign-born adults of foreign-born parents grew by more than 5 percentage points in England (United Kingdom) ([Table B.3.10 \(Trend\)](#)). Over this same time period, the skills of immigrants evolved positively in numeracy (and remained similar in literacy). As a result, the numeracy gap between migrants and native-born adults narrowed in numeracy ([Table A.3.15](#)).

How do skills relate to economic and social outcomes in England (United Kingdom)?

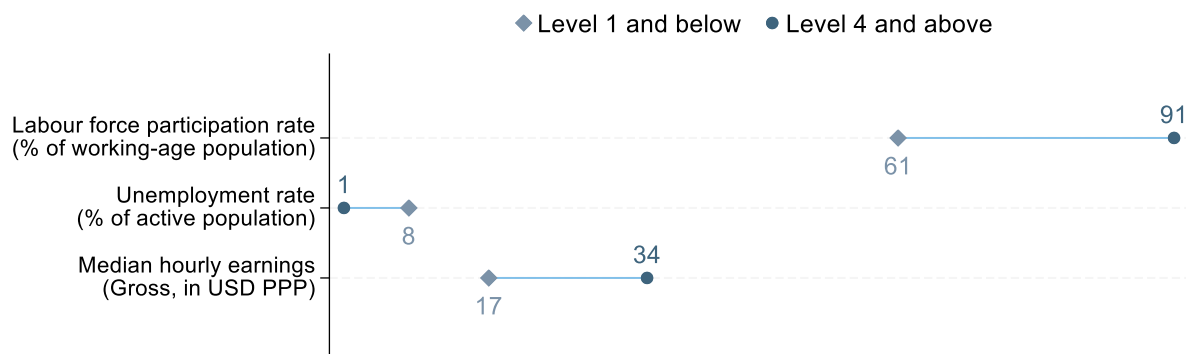
Skills have a major impact on lives. In general, higher skills bring significant economic and social benefits. Adults with higher skills tend to have higher educational qualifications; however, the benefits of higher skills extend above and beyond the opportunities associated merely with formal educational qualifications.

Skills are key drivers of employability and wages

In England (United Kingdom), as well as on average across OECD countries, adults who score at the highest levels of the numeracy proficiency scale have significantly better employment opportunities compared to adults who score at or below Level 1 (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Employment outcomes in England (United Kingdom), by numeracy proficiency level

Adults aged 25-65 not in formal education



Note: Does not include adults who were only administered the doorstep interview due to a language barrier.

Source: [Tables A.4.2 \(N\) and A.4.7 \(N\)](#).

In England (United Kingdom), differences in employment outcomes by skill level persist even when comparing adults with similar education attainment (and after accounting for other differences that might be associated with higher skills). After accounting for these differences, a one-standard-deviation increase in numeracy proficiency is associated with a 7-percentage point higher likelihood of participating in the labour force ([Table A.4.5](#)); and, among the active population, with a further 2-percentage-point reduction in the risk of being unemployed ([Table A.4.3](#)). And, among employed adults, a one-standard-deviation increase in numeracy proficiency is associated with wages that are 15% higher, a statistically significant difference. For comparison, a one-standard-deviation increase in education is associated with wages that are 16% higher in England (United Kingdom) ([Table A.4.8](#)).

How individual well-being and civic engagement relate to skills

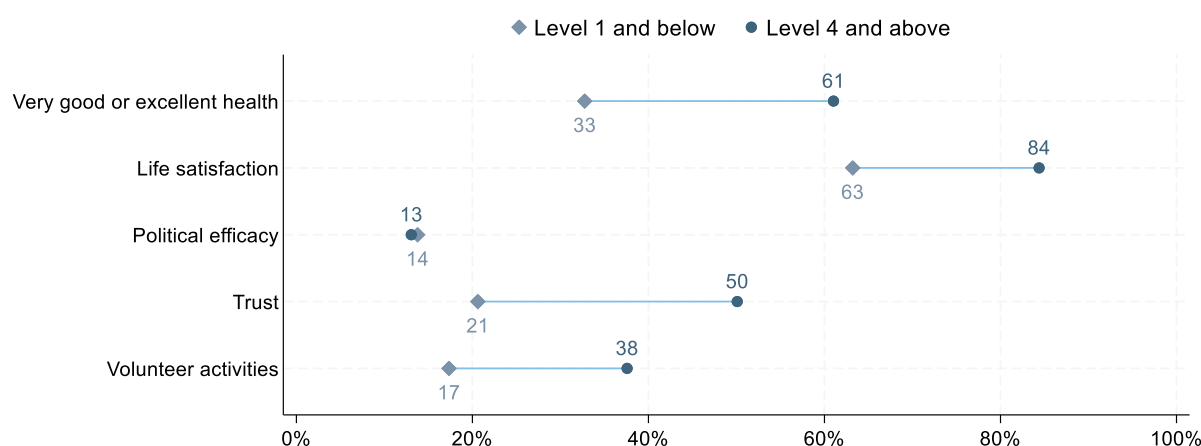
Skills are closely related to both individual well-being (e.g. self-reported health and life satisfaction) and civic engagement (e.g. political efficacy, trust and volunteering). Many low-skilled adults feel disconnected from political processes and lack the skills to engage with complex digital information, which is a growing concern for modern democracies.

Adults who score at the highest levels of the proficiency scale were significantly more likely to report high levels of life satisfaction and being in very good or excellent health than adults who score at or below Level 1, in England (United Kingdom) as well as on average across OECD countries (Figure 7 and [Table A.4.10 \(N\)](#)).

In England (United Kingdom), this positive relationship between life satisfaction, health and numeracy holds even after controlling for a number of personal characteristics (age, gender, years of education, immigrant background, parental educational attainment, and whether an individual lives with a partner or has children) ([Table A.4.11 \(N\)](#)).

Figure 7. Well-being and civic outcomes in England (United Kingdom), by numeracy proficiency level

Adults aged 25-65 not in formal education



Notes: Does not include adults who were only administered the doorstep interview due to a language barrier. All outcomes are based on self-reports. *Life satisfaction*, *Trust*, *Political efficacy*: Share of adults reporting a value of 7 or higher, on scales ranging from 0 to 10, in response to the following questions: 'All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?'; 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted [=10], or that you can't be too careful [=0] in dealing with people?'; 'How much would you say the political system in [your country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?'. *Volunteer activities*: Share of adults who reported any volunteer activity in the past 12 months.

Source: [Table A.4.10 \(N\)](#).

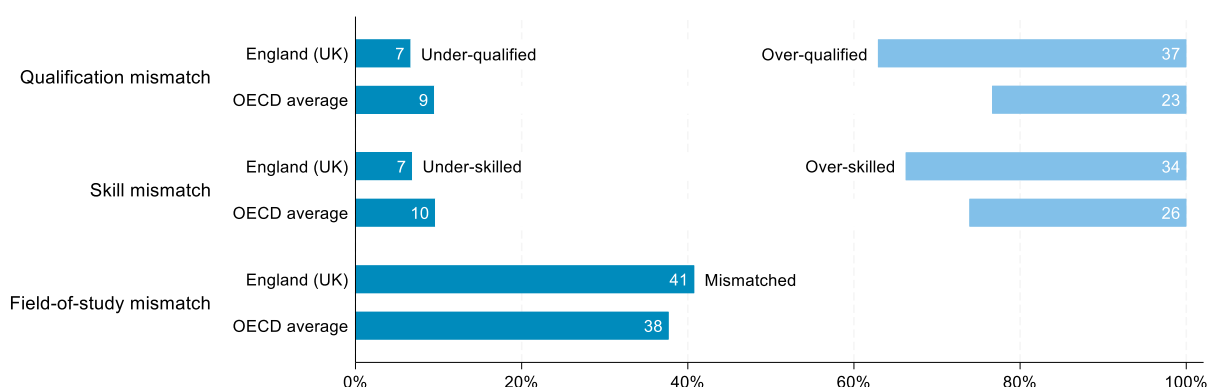
In England (United Kingdom), adults who scored at the highest levels of the proficiency scales were also significantly more likely to report a high level of agreement with the statement “people can be trusted” (as opposed to “you can’t be too careful”) and having participated in volunteering activities during the previous year (Figure 7). The positive relationships of skills with trust and volunteering hold even when accounting for a number of other social and demographic characteristics (age, gender, years of education, immigrant background, parental educational attainment, and whether an individual lives with a partner or has children) ([Table A.4.11 \(N\)](#)).

A good match between the skills and qualifications of workers and those required by their jobs is essential for a well-functioning and productive economy

In OECD countries, many workers are mismatched to their jobs, meaning that their qualifications, skills, or fields of study are different from what their current job would require. Mismatches can result from an inefficient allocation of workers to jobs. They can also reflect the fact that workforce skills and qualifications are not keeping pace with structural changes in the economy, driven by digitalisation, an ageing population, and the green transition.

Figure 8. Mismatches in qualifications, skills and field of study

Employed adults aged 25-65 who are not self-employed



Note: Does not include adults who were only administered the doorstep interview due to a language barrier.

Source: [Table A.4.12](#).

In England (United Kingdom), about 37% of workers are over-qualified (OECD average: 23%), and a further 7% are under-qualified (OECD average: 9%), meaning their highest educational qualification is above or below the level that is typically required for their current job (Figure 8).

About 7% of workers report that some of their skills are lower than what is required for their job (OECD average: 10%) (Figure 8). In England (United Kingdom), they often say this is because they need to improve their computer or software skills (43%), followed by project management or organizational skills (28%) ([Table A.4.13](#)).

Finally, 41% of workers are mismatched in terms of field of study, because their highest qualification is not in the field that is most relevant to their job (Figure 8).

In OECD countries, adults who are overqualified for their job incur significant economic and social costs. This is less the case in England (United Kingdom): on average, their wages are 18% lower than peers in well-matched jobs who have similar educational attainment (OECD average: 12% lower) ([Table A.4.16](#)). However, they are not significantly less likely to report a high level of life satisfaction (OECD average: 4 percentage points less likely) ([Table A.4.17](#)).

Key features of the Second Cycle of the Survey of Adult Skills

The survey and participants

The Survey of Adult Skills collects data through a personal interview and a self-completed assessment. As a household survey, data collection takes place in the respondents' own homes. In England (United Kingdom), 4941 adults participated in the survey (this reflects an overall response rate of 38%). The sample was drawn to be representative of about 36.2 million 16-to-65-year-olds residing in the country at the time of data collection, irrespective of nationality, citizenship or language status. Analyses were conducted to ensure that no significant bias would result from non-response (see the *Reader's Companion* for more details on these analyses).

The assessment

The 2023 Survey of Adult Skills assessed adults in three domains: literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem solving. The assessments required adults to complete a set of tasks that reflect how these skills are applied across a wide range of situations in adults' lives. Many tasks involve data-intensive, complex digital environments, which are increasingly common in the workplace and everyday life in modern societies.

To this end, the assessment was exclusively administered on digital devices (tablets). This constitutes an important innovation over the previous cycle of the survey, where respondents had the option to sit the assessment using paper-based instruments.

The proficiency of respondents in each of these broad skill domains can be estimated based on their success and failure in completing assessment tasks. Proficiency estimates are reported on 500-point scales, and the same scales can also be used to describe the difficulty of assessment tasks. The analysis of how item characteristics vary as difficulty increases allows the OECD to identify and describe discrete levels of proficiency. If an individual's score is within a given level of proficiency, this implies that he or she is likely to successfully complete any task located at or below that same level.

The background questionnaire

Before completing the assessment on a tablet, participants in the Survey of Adult Skills were asked to provide information about themselves, including: their demographic and background characteristics, educational attainment, labour force status and employment, skills use, information on the working environment, non-economic outcomes, and social and emotional skills. The questionnaire was administered by a trained interviewer.

Some participants were not sufficiently fluent in the assessment language and were not able to communicate well enough with the interviewer to answer the background questionnaire. In these cases, a "doorstep" questionnaire was offered. This self-administered questionnaire, available in many different languages, collects key personal background information on gender, age, years of schooling, employment status, country of origin and duration of residence in the survey country. A statistical model was then used to estimate the proficiency of these respondents in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving, based solely on the information available from this questionnaire.

In the first cycle of the survey, the doorstep questionnaire was not available. As a result, no information was collected on adults lacking sufficient language proficiency, and their proficiency could not be estimated. The inclusion of respondents to the doorstep interview can potentially affect the comparability of results between the first and the second cycle of the survey. In OECD reports, doorstep respondents are generally excluded when comparing results across cycles.

References

OECD (2024), *Do adults have the skills they need to thrive in a changing world? Survey of Adult Skills 2023*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b263dc5d-en>

OECD (2024), *Survey of Adult Skills 2023 Reader's Companion*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3639d1e2-en>

For more information about the Survey of Adult Skills visit www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/piaac.html

Explore, compare and visualise more data and analysis using <https://gpseducation.oecd.org>.

For queries or more information, please contact the PIAAC team at edu.piaac@oecd.org.

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